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COMPETITION

Thirty arborists, a few tall trees, one title

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The life of an arborist sounds quaint: You get to look at the pretty canopies of live oaks and dangle, safely, from the branches of a pecan tree 35 feet above the ground.

But there's nothing fanciful about being a skilled tree-climber, especially when it comes to outdoing your peers.

That's what 30 arborists, most from Texas but some from as far away as New Zealand, had in mind Saturday at the 26th annual Texas Tree Climbing Championship, hosted by the Texas chapter of the International Society of Arboriculture.

The two-day competition also offers an opportunity to compete in an international climbing competition this summer.

"It's like the Masters (Tournament) in golf," said James Tuttle, 59, an arborist from Lubbock who is the chairman of the state society.

"It's definitely individual, but there's a lot of camaraderie. There are all these young, virile guys out there. So there are lots of bragging rights at stake, especially when an old guy like me can beat one of these young pups," Tuttle said.

The event was held in Govalle Park, a shaded park of pecan trees perfectly suited for the competition because of their height, said Larry Maginnis, one of the judges.

The championship allowed arborists to show off their abilities in a series of tests such as the work climb, during which contestants climb to five stations in a tree performing a different task at each station, or the secured footlock, a test of a climber's ability to ascend 40 feet on a double-climbing line. The field was narrowed from 30 competitors to three finalists by Saturday afternoon, based on judges' scores from events throughout the day.

Any arborist could post the highest score on the five tests, but only the highest-scoring Texan would be asked to represent the state chapter at the international climbing competition scheduled for July in Providence, R.I.

"It's a competition with a unique twist," Maginnis said. "One of the most powerful things we get to do is to meet and learn the latest techniques and industry standards."

Nevic Donnelly, an urban forestry adviser, said that the event is a good opportunity for learning and bonding, as well as "a really good opportunity for arborists and professionals to try themselves against each other."

Spectators at the contest were mostly wives, friends and children sitting in fold-out chairs in the sprawling park as the temperatures climbed into the 90s. Contestants such as Keith Babberney, 41, hung from ropes in trees or admired their competition from behind orange plastic barriers placed around each tree.

Babberney has competed in the championship for 12 years; he's been an arborist for 15. He didn't do as well as he'd hoped this year, he said, but he enjoys participating in the event because he learns something new about climbing each year.


"It's not as much about beating anyone as doing your own personal best," Babberney said. "The first time I came to compete, I didn't know anyone. Now, I feel like everyone out here is a friend of mine," he said. "It's like a big family picnic."

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